

## **Fabulous Freebies**

*Bruce Wentzell, Teacher, Sandy Lake Academy, Bedford, NS*

There's never been a better time to be a cheapskate. If you thought that the golden age of free stuff ended when the dot-com bubble burst, guess again. The past few years have seen an explosion of giveaways--both Web-based services and free software--that make the anaemic home-page building apps and first-generation Web mail services of the late 1990s pale in comparison.

In part, we have the open-source movement to thank. Open-source projects have recently produced several outstanding consumer-oriented programs. The other developments putting smiles on the faces of the tight-fisted are advertising-supported software and Web services. As online advertising gathers momentum, it no longer seems so silly to give away endless gigabytes of hard-disk storage and server bandwidth. As a consumer, all you need is the willingness to put up with some banner ads.

In the following reviews, you will find uncovered some of the best free software and services I could find. These are the real deal--no hobbled half-products or demos that time out after 30 days.

[FoxIt Reader](#): For viewing PDF files, Foxit Reader beats Adobe Reader hands-down. This program requires no installation--just run the executable--and it launches in about 1 second. Plus, it includes some desirable tools that Adobe lacks, such as a "typewriter" that lets you edit any text in the PDF, not just in form fields.

[Google Desktop](#): Harness the power of the Internet's most popular search engine on your own PC. Google Desktop indexes nearly every document on your hard drive and then includes those files in your Google searches. A sidebar displays information modules that you select, such as current news, updated items from recently visited sites, and local weather.

[Project Gutenberg](#): Like to read? Project Gutenberg has been creating electronic versions of the classics for three decades, and its library currently contains the full text of more than 17,000 volumes. Read them online, or get your own free CD or DVD containing thousands of titles.

[Bartleby](#): Like a reference library, Bartleby is home to several sources, including a dictionary, an encyclopaedia, and various books of quotations. It offers audio pronunciations of words, a feature you have to pay for at other dictionary sites.

[Backpack](#): With this easy-to-use Web application, you or class can create shared Web pages. Pages may include to-do lists, notes, pictures, and more.

[iTeamwork](#): This Web service can help your class keep track of complicated projects. After creating a project, you can add and assign tasks, and mark them complete. ITeamwork enables you to see at a glance what still needs to be done and by whom.

[Firefox](#): Still using Internet Explorer? It may be time you started using Firefox for most of your Web browsing--it's a faster, more secure, and a more flexible Web browser.

[AbiWord](#): If all you need is a word processor, try AbiWord, a lightweight and full-featured word processor that is compatible with Microsoft Word documents. It looks and feels a lot like Word, too.

[Thunderbird](#): You may not care for Thunderbird's simple look, but its tight security and robust stability make it one of the top choices for managing e-mail on your PC.

[Trillian Basic](#): If you use AIM, ICQ, IRC, MSN Messenger, and/or Yahoo Messenger, ditch your proprietary clients and get Trillian Basic instead. Its clean, ad-free interface is a breath of fresh air.

[SightSpeed](#): For live video calls, it's hard to beat SightSpeed, which is simple to set up, neatly synchronizes lip movements and audio, and provides easy in-call controls. The free version permits unlimited one-to-one video calling.

[Yahoo Calendar](#): If you don't object to an occasional ad appearing next to your appointment book, Yahoo's calendar is one of the best available online. Its Time Guides let you easily insert holidays, local weather reports, and events from Yahoo Groups into your calendar; and optional software syncs your calendar with Outlook, Outlook Express, and Palm PDAs.

[Yahoo Widgets](#): Formerly known as Konfabulator, this application puts "widgets" on your desktop that provide information such as stock tickers, weather reports, and photos; alternatively, they can provide services, like running search engine queries or storing notes. Choose from thousands of widgets, or as many as your desktop can bear.

[Furl](#): Furl lets you save your favourite Web pages in an online account that you can access from any computer. Furl lets you even save the entire page--so even if the site becomes inaccessible later, you still have a copy.

[Flickr](#): This popular photo-sharing service makes uploading pics, sharing them with others, or posting them to your Weblog a breeze.

[Avvenu](#): Like many file sharing services, this one lets you access your files in a Web browser. What's unique about Avvenu is that it lets you browse files and view thumbnails of images from a cell phone or PDA, too. No need to upload files to a server, as the files stay on your desktop.

[All-in-One Secretmaker](#): If you must use Internet Explorer, the least you can do is plug its security holes. All-in-One Secretmaker can help. It blocks banner ads and pop-ups, filters spam, and offers a collection of utilities for cleaning up and securing your system.

[Trend Micro HouseCall](#): If installing antivirus and antispyware programs isn't an option at your school, do yourself a favour and visit this site regularly. Trend Micro's software runs in your browser to scan for and eliminate malware on your computer.

[Irfanview](#): For basic image editing, file format conversions, and the like, simple-to-use Irfanview, I feel, is your best bet. It installs quickly, doesn't take up much room on your hard disk, and supports a huge variety of image file formats.

[Pandora](#): Don't be like me and play the same song until you're sick of it. Enter the name of an artist or song you like, and Pandora will create a custom "radio station" for you that plays similar music, right in your browser. This service makes surprisingly good choices, and it uses your feedback to refine them further. And if you get tired of one station, you can just create a new one.

[Audacity](#): This simple sound-file editor can import and export audio files in a variety of formats. It's a snap to use.

[Gmail](#): In my opinion, the best Web-based E-mail service. It behaves more like a Windows application than like a Web mail service. What's more, Gmail can be a huge time-saver. Instead of making you sift through your sent messages and your inbox to reconstruct an e-mail exchange, Gmail's interface presents every message in a thread--the ones you wrote on a given topic as well as those you received--in a single stack. Gmail permits you to export and import contacts, and it allows you to set the reply-to address to something other than your gmail.com address--features that most free Web mail providers don't have. It also gives you POP3 access (so you can download messages to a Windows mail program), another rarity.

[MSN Hotmail](#): It has a Windows-like look, but the tiny buttons make the interface awkward, and the address book is limited to 650 entries. Its successor, Microsoft's Ajax-based Windows Live Mail (now in beta) is an Outlook-like application--or an Outlook Express--like one, if you select that view--offering drag-and-drop convenience.

[Blogger](#): The first major free blogging tool (launched in 1999), Blogger stays ahead of the game by remaining incredibly convenient to use and by offering a rich complement of features. If you have a Web server, you can use Blogger to publish your Weblog via FTP. Uploading images is a simple process. Blogger is especially friendly to mobile bloggers. Can't get access to a computer easily? Send a picture or a text message from your phone to a special SMS address, and up it goes. Blogger's Audioblogger service even offers voice blogging: Just call a special number, enter a code, and say your piece. Blogger converts the sound of your voice (up to 5 minutes' worth) into an audio file and posts it for all to hear.

[Abilon](#): A fast software-based news reader. This powerful, speedy reader offers you a choice of views: You can opt for a three-pane view with feeds on the left, headlines in the middle, and articles on the right; or you can switch to a two-column view. It has a built-in tabbed browser, too. One tool lets you quickly and easily post items to your

Blogger, LiveJournal, or Movable Type blog. And finally, Abilon speedily imports and exports OPML (Outline Processor Markup Language) files, which are crucial for transferring your list of subscriptions to another news reader.

[Bloglines](#): If you use more than one PC, a Web-based feed reader may be a better selection. By far the best choice for me in this category is Bloglines. This site uses frames, so you see a list of your subscribed feeds on the left pane while you read the latest articles from each feed on the right. Shortcut keys help you speed through the news, article by article or feed by feed. Bloglines also supports the import and export of OPML files.

[Revver](#): A relative newcomer as a hosting service to let you upload your videos and share them with your friends or with the entire world--via the Web. Like other services, Revver sells ads that appear with your videos--but unlike others, Revver shares 50 percent of the ad revenue with you. To facilitate this, you have to enter a bit more information than on other sites. The service's playback interface is simple and reliable. Even if you didn't set up your videos as streaming files, Revver streams the video on playback. You are free to download Revver videos, since they have ads embedded in them, and you can republish them anywhere on the Internet.